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ST. PAUL'S PRAYER

by
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THE PROTESTANT FAITH

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What a person prays for is a good indication of what his thoughts and values in life are. For example, the prayer which Jesus gave His disciples when they asked Him to teach them to pray shows what was uppermost in the mind of Jesus. He put first the petition that God's name might be honoured. This means so little to us that a lot of people don't recognise that this opening sentence of the Lord's prayer is a petition, a request to God for what should be desired most of all, that God's name might be hallowed, that He might be recognised and honoured as God by all the world.

Similarly, the prayers of the Apostle Paul show what was uppermost in his aspirations. In several of his letters he tells those to whom he was writing what he was praying for. We have a letter written to his friend Philemon. It is a private letter and has been preserved, we might say, by accident, and it is all the more interesting for not being intended for general

reading. It is a short letter of only one chapter and in verses 4-6 St. Paul tells Philemon that he has been praying for him. He wrote: "I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers because I hear of your love and of the faith which you have toward the Lord and all the saints, and I pray that the fellowship of your faith may be effectual by the knowledge of all the good things that are ours in Christ".

I. It is interesting to notice that the first feature in the Apostle's prayer is thanksgiving. Thanksgiving should characterise the Christian, because thanksgiving honours God, for by it we acknowledge that God is the author of the benefits which we are experiencing. So often we are selfish in our enjoyment of what we have been given. Thanksgiving is the antidote to selfishness. When we give God thanks for what we have, it is an expression of faith, and it honours Him by the recognition that He is the giver.

II. It is interesting also to notice what is the subject of St. Paul's thanksgiving. He thanks God for what he has heard of Philemon's Christian life, for Philemon's faith in Christ, and for his acts of kindness to his fellow Christians. It is an indication of the reality of St. Paul's belief in the truth of the Gospel that he gives thanks to God when he hears of other people's conversion. We have other examples of this in other letters, for example in Colossians 1:3 where St. Paul thanks God for the hope of eternal life which the Colossian Christians now inherit through their conversion. Jesus said that there is joy in heaven when a man or a woman turns back to God, and we note that when St. Paul hears of a man's Christian life it moves him to thank God. We can judge the depth of our own spirituality by this example. Do we thank God when we hear of other people's faith and of their Christian generosity? Because St. Paul took seriously the truth of heaven and of judgment he was not only stirred up

to preach the gospel, but also to thank God for the salvation of those who received it.

III. In verse 6 we come to the content of St. Paul's prayer. St. Paul tells Philemon that he prays that the fellowship of Philemon's faith might be effectual by the knowledge of all the benefits that are ours in Christ.

The Christian religion consists of faith in God and this faith finds its expression in life: there is the fellowship of friends; but Christian fellowship is the fellowship which springs from unity in believing profoundly the same great truths of God's love for us in the Lord Jesus Christ. It is a fellowship through sharing in the same great hope of eternal life and the kingdom which will be ours with the coming of our Saviour. If our Christian fellowship is weak, it is because our sharing in a common belief and common hope is weak. This prayer of St. Paul that the fellowship of our faith

might be effectual is one that we all ought to pray most earnestly because it is at this point that Christianity is so sadly lacking very often these days. Christians engage in many common activities and the church meets for formal worship on Sundays, but how effectual is the fellowship of faith? Christian institutions may come and go; and may be helpful or less so according to the ethos of the age; but the two fundamental unchanging principles of Christianity are on the one hand faith, and on the other its expression in fellowship.

IV. It is interesting to note how St. Paul envisages the fellowship of faith being strengthened. He prays that it might be effectual by the knowledge of all the benefits that are ours in Christ. Faith takes its value from its object and if Christian faith is to be true, and the fellowship which it engenders genuine, this faith must be based on true knowledge. It is so easy to have a superstitious faith. The heathen who

worship idols believe that their idols can help them but their faith is baseless. The sophisticated Westerner does not worship idols made with hammer and chisel, but he may believe in a God of his own mental invention. His faith is as baseless as the more primitive heathen. It is possible to have a baseless faith even within the Christian church. I need only give one or two illustrations. For example, the Roman Catholic practice of sprinkling oneself with holy water on leaving church is a baseless, superstitious faith. This holy water is for the purpose of warding off devils. This is clearly expressed in the words used in the service of consecrating the holy water before Mass on Sundays. The priest first consecrates the salt with these words: "I adjure thee creature salt by the living true and holy God (the priest makes three signs of the cross over the salt)... that thou mightest be a blessing to both body and soul to all who make use of thy service and that in every place where thou art

sprinkled every deceiving phantom, every evil, every subtlety of the devil's wiles, as well as every unclean spirit may depart..." The priest then addresses the water "I adjure thee creature water in the name of the Almighty Father, of Jesus Christ His Son our Lord and in the power of the Holy Spirit that thou mightest become water that is consecrated to drive out all enemy power and that thou thyself be able to root out the enemy and transplant him to where the fallen angels are..." The belief that salt prayed over in this manner can be a blessing to the soul, to quote the words of the prayer, or that water so prayed over can have power to transplant the devil back to hell, to quote the prayer again, is quite baseless. To speak frankly, it is religious superstition, often difficult in practice to distinguish from magic. (The quotations are from "On the Damascus Road", May 1967 p.11.)

The prayers of the service indicate that the holy water is

to be used as protection against every conceivable danger. It is to be used "against every uncleanness, every attack on an evil spirit, for the driving out of devils and to drive away sickness. May there be in this place which is blessed by this water no contaminating spirit in control, no poison filled air; may hereby all ambushments of hidden enemies be ineffective. May the terror of the poisonous serpent remain far removed." The Roman Rituals have 250 formulas for blessing with holy water, including the forms for blessing cattle, chickens, cars, typewriters. These blessings may only be performed by a priest. But all these actions are baseless, and the faith that is put in them, although sincere, is baseless faith. We must see to it that our faith in God and in His protection is based on God's Word. Otherwise we are in the same position as the heathen, who base their faith on their own ideas. And this tendency is not confined to one denomination. For example, I notice that appeals for money

are often based on statements which cannot be supported from Scripture.

It is most important that our faith should be based on knowledge, as St. Paul prays that Philemon's faith might be. A knowledge of God comes to us through His Word. That is why we should read it ourselves, and why preachers should devote themselves to expounding it, not merely using it as a vehicle for their own ideas.

V. And notice that the knowledge that St. Paul prays that Philemon might increase in is a knowledge of all the good things that are ours in Christ. As our mind apprehends and dwells on God's goodness to us in Christ, the provision for the present and hope for the future, so our faith springs to life and grows strong, and this in turn creates fellowship amongst all those who share that faith.

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27 August 1967